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AUTHOR Heisel, Marsel A.
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ABSTRACT

Presented in this paper is a study undertaken to determine the level of social interaction and isolation in a randomly selected sample of 156 aged blacks in an urban area of New Jersey. The interaction patterns are analyzed in terms of availability, relations with, and reactions toward close and distant relatives and friends. The relation between subjective and objective states of loneliness is examined. Findings presented show no positive relation between living alone and feeling lonely. It is pointed out that, in spite of frequent contacts with children, elderly persons in the sample depend mostly on friends for companionship and for social pursuits such as visiting, shopping, and activities over the weekend and major holidays. Participation in club-type activities and church groups is described as minimal. In addition, it is stated that one third of the sample studied said they felt alone and about two thirds expressed a desire for more social interaction. An argument is made for the need for outreach programs in which social service workers act as kin or friend surrogates. (Author/EB)

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SOCIAL INTERACTION AND ISOLATION AMONG A GROUP OF ELDERLY BLACKS [1]

Marsel A. Heisel [2]

The purpose of this paper is to describe the social functioning and social needs of a group of elderly, poor and black residents of an inner city with the belief that the reported findings may be of use in the planning of service delivery to similar populations.

Reduced opportunity for social interaction is a problem that most older people have to face. Death of spouse or friends, retirement from work, migration from the place of origin where many relatives still reside, mobility of children or loved ones are all

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2. Assistant Professor, Graduate School of Social Work, Rutgers, the State University, New Brunswick, New Jersey

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factors that diminish the potential for meaningful human contact. Chronic ailments sometimes interfere with the capacity to go places. A meager income, lack of transportation, the fear of being mugged or attacked in the street push the aged, especially the poor aged living in the inner city, into further isolation.

Isolation among the aged has been of special concern to gerontologists, and some of the inferences, at least on the surface, appear to be in disagreement. Disengagement theory views the tendency towards reduced social interaction with age as a natural, and not necessarily detrimental phenomenon (2). Other data support the hypotheses that social isolation has a negative impact on the aged (1) and that social interaction is conductive to morale (5). The possibility that social isolation among the aged is not as dramatic and widespread as is often thought to be has also been advanced (6).

The divergent points of view that have emerged most probably reflect the complexity of the issue and the lack of normative data from different socioeconomic and cultural groups. Much of what we know about social interaction, in fact, much of what we know about old age, come from white, often middle-class populations. Research with the aged, in spite of some increase (4), has lagged. We know very little about the degree of isolation and the interactional needs of older blacks, particularly those living in the inner city. Knowledge in this area would be especially of interest and value to those who want to deliver adequate services to this much neglected population. This study is a preliminary attempt towards providing such information.

METHODOLOGY

The data presented were obtained from detailed interviews with a random sample of 156 men and women aged 55 and over from two

census tracts in Metropolitan N. J.. Among the people 55 to 59 years of age, only those no longer in the labor force were kept in the sample. Aproximately two thirds of the people live in a large housing project and a third in the surrounding city. The interviewers were all from the local black community and the interview schedule was prepared with their help. The methodology involved and a comprehensive description of the inquiry has been reported elsewhere (3).

Two thirds of the respondents are women and a third are men. The mean age is 66, with 20% of the sample below 60 and 20% 75 and above at time of interviewing. Almost all the men and women had been in the labor market and 95% are now retired. Only 34% of the men and 5% of the women were skilled workers, the rest being unskilled, semi-skilled or domestic workers. 79% of the men and 85% of the women were classified as being mobile--able to get around and do one's daily chores without difficulty. The average income is just short of $150 a month.

The extent of social interaction and isolation of the respondents was explored from various vantage points which are described with the reported findings.

1. Living Conditions: Living Alone or With Others

Isolation is a value laden word. Objectively, it can mean a state of beng separate, apart. Subjectively, it can mean a state of loneliness, maybe even desolation. We have tried to look at both the objective and subject states and the correspondence between the two.

Living alone is taken as an operational definition of objective isolation. 46% of the respondents - 41% of the men and 48% of the women - are living alone. We did not find people who are living

alone subjectively more lonely or of lower morale than those living with others -- if anything, the opposite seems to be true. People who live alone definitely have a more positive self-perception: they are more likely to say that they are doing fine for their age, that they look younger than their age, that they are able to do more than others. They seem to have a more positive outlook on life; more of them are 'happy', more of them find nothing to be unhappy about. They often give their independence as the reason for feeling good about their age.

A much higher proportion of those who live with others say that they are more lonely now than in the past, that other people don't treat them right.

These are the general trends. What the data also show is that there are eleven people among those who are living alone who are not mobile - not able to move around easily and take care of their daily chores-and that one third of the respondents in both groups feel all alone.

Family Constellation

In spite of urbanization, and in the case of our respondents migration, the importance of relatives in the life of an older person cannot be denied. Before analyzing interaction with close and distant relatives, let us take a brief look at the family backgrounds.

90% of the respondents were born in the South; they come from very large families--families with an average of 7 children. There is no difference among the people who live alone and those who do not live alone in the size of families they come from. 61% of the respondents were raised by both parents. 95% were married at least once. Presently, one third of all people are married and living with their spouse. As could be predicted,

the proportion of those living with a spouse is twice as high among men than it is among women. Half the respondents are widowed: 63% of the women are widowed, but only 19% of the men.

The family of procreation is much smaller than the family of orientation. The average number of children they have is 3. 43% have at least one child living in Newark. Women who live alone, however, present a very different picture from the rest: they have had fewer children, many more of them had children who died in infancy or at birth, and one third of them never had any children. Only 32% have children in the area.

The men who are living with somebody are predominantly married men living with their wives (75%). When left without a wife, they seldom, if ever, seem to go and live with a child or brother, or sister. Women are more likely to live with close relatives. It should not be assumed, however, that the older woman who lives with one of her children or a sister (none of them lives with a brother) is being taken care of by that relative. From what the respondents tell us, the situation may often be the reverse, such as an older woman taking care of a disabled son or daughter. This may be one of the reasons for the relative loneliness and unhappiness of women who are not living alone, but our data are as yet insufficient to draw such a conclusion.

86% of the respondents have relatives in Newark. The proportion of women who have close relatives is considerably higher than men; this is probably because widows tend to move close to their children or siblings.

Our data show that men and women differ in their interactions with relatives, depending on whether the relatives are distant or close. The rate of interaction with relatives moves at opposite

direction for men and women--as the blood tie becomes closer, men's rate of interaction decreases.

We asked our respondents to list the relatives they have in Newark, and obtained information about the last time they had either visiting or telephone contact with them. When we look at the interactions within the last three days we find that men interact least with their children, slightly more with their brothers and sisters, and more more with "other relatives". Women interact most with their children and their siblings, less with other relatives.

Interaction

To find out the extent of social interaction with minimum memory distortion, we asked the respondent: "Did you go out yesterday?". Interviewing took place Tuesday to Friday to eliminate week-end contamination; we avoided interviewing after a rainy day and kept a record of weather conditions. (Weather the day before interviewing was: hot/warm: 85%; cool/cloudy: 10%)

We recorded all the outings the previous day, whether these outings were alone or with somebody (relative, friend, or other). For those who had not gone out the day before, we asked why they did not go out, when was the last time they went out, and whom they went out with. The same questions were asked about visitors to their home, telephone calls they made or telephone calls that were made to them. Information was also obtained on activities of the last wekend, usual weekend activities, what they did on major holidays.

63% of the 156 respondents went out the day before; 37% did not. The proportion of men who went out is considerably higher than women (men: 73%; women:59%). Also, as one could predict, more mobile people went out than those who are not mobile, but

the difference is not very great (mobile: 66%; not mobile: 54%); obviously people who are not mobile are not all staying home.

Some respondents went out twice (16) and a few went out three times -- a total of 122 outings by 98 people. Close to a third of the outings (29%) were undertaken with a companion, the rest alone. Shopping is the predominant outing (one third of the people who were out went shopping). Close to a fourth went visiting (22%) and 21% went 'just out' (small walk, sit on a bench, etc.) which often is a kind of visiting.

While most people who went shopping or just out went alone, they went visiting in company of a friend (41%) or of a relative (32%).

11 of the 98 went out for health care (Doctor, clinic): only one was a man 10 were women - proportionally, three times as many women as men. Do women take better care of their health, or does this provide a legitimate outing? 8 of the 11 do <u>not</u> live alone, but 7 of them went out alone. The sample is very small, but in the light of previously reported information concerning this group the results suggest that women living with others may be looking for socially acceptable ways--or just a reason--for interacting outside the home.

Only 8 people, out of the 98, went to club type social activities - (including Church groups, Senior Citizen clubs. Seven of them were women and they all went with somebody.

9 people went out to do chores (such as cashing checks, getting food stamps, going to the cleaners); 7 went to work.

One third (35% of people interviewed) did not go out the day before and 78% of those who did not go out are women. Only a third did not go out for health reasons. The others stayed

home because, as they put it, 'there is nowhere to go'. Almost all of the respondents who wanted to go out but could think of nowhere to go were women and mobile.

18 people (12%) had not been out at all for two weeks or more.

From our data it appears that compared with those who went out the day before, those who did not go out are less prone to do things alone. Except for visiting, they are less than half as likely to go out alone. Again, the sample is very small, but one is tempted to speculate. Could those who did not go out - (they are mainly women) - be people with great affiliative needs who are unwilling to do things alone--except maybe visiting, where there is a guarantee that the need will be satisfied. There is no difference in having gone out the day before by living conditions, so these results cannot be attributed to habit formation, or just not having learned to be alone. Maybe the people who are saying 'there is nothing to do' also mean 'there is nobody to do something with'. If this is true, than the greater the individual's needs for interpersonal relations, the less likely he is (or rather she is) to be in a situation where interaction is possible - (i.e., the more isolated he is). Our prediction would be that if the possibilities for companionship were provided, many of the people who currently stay home would be going out.

It is of interest to note that outings undertaken in the company of others are most likely to be with friends or neighbors, or with distant relatives; almost never with children.

Visitors

71 persons (45% of those interviewed) had a sum of 90 visitors the day before. People who are mobile were visited most (71%). Men have fewer visitors than women, and people who live with others

have fewer visitors than those who live alone.

Of the 90 visits, 9 were by a child visiting a mother. In all cases the mother does not live alone and is mobile. 20% of the visits were by relatives other than child, and most of the rest by friends and neighbors. People who are not mobile and who probably need visitors most are visited much more often by friends than by relatives.

When all the visits are combined (160 visits which include last visitors for those who had none the day before), we see that 9% were by a child, 26% by relatives, 54% by friends and neighbors. 18 persons had not been visited for over one week. 9 persons had not been visited for over two weeks and most of them live alone and are not mobile. These are the pockets of need where outreach programs must go. The fact that only 7% of the visits was by a social service type person and only 2% by somebody affiliated with a church seems to indicate that not much is being done by traditional service in home visiting. We know from our respondents that of the people who needed help the day before, only half were able to obtain the help they needed.

Telephone Interactions

88% of the respondents have telephone -- the percentage is slightly lower in men (82%). It was reassuring to know that all the people who are not mobile have telephones. On the other hand, there are 10 persons who live alone and have no telephones.

Of those who have phones, 58% made at least one call the day before. Women made three times as many calls as men the previous day.

Telephone interaction patterns differ according to living conditions. People who live with others make fewer calls, and

most of their calls are to relatives. People who live alone make more calls but few of them are to relatives. There seems to be a life situation and life style difference among those who live alone and those who live with others. People living alone have fewer children, fewer family ties, say they are less lonesome and seem more dependent on friends for companionship. Those living with others have more interaction with relatives, few interaction with friends, and are more lonesome.

Men are much less likely than women to call relatives. Of all the calls made to children (9%) of all calls) none were by men.

Telephone calls received follow the same pattern. It is interesting to note, however, that about 40% of all the calls are from relatives -- most of them from children. Children may be too busy to visit but try to keep in contact with the parent by phone.

Most telephone calls -- either initiated or received -- are just to talk. The few 'business' conversations were all with friends or distant relatives - not with children.

Week End Activities

Seventeen % of the respondents did nothing over the week end. (Table 7) Those who did nothing tend to be men, to live alone, and not to be mobile.

The most common week end activity is going to church. One third of the respondents went to church; the proportion is higher among women. The next common activities are shopping, going out for fun, going visiting, watching TV, and among women, housework.

On the whole, men are less likely to do something special, but those who do are more likely than women to engage in the activity alone. For example, among the women who went to church,

1/3 were alone, but among the men, 1/2 were alone. The same is true in shopping - proportionally close to twice as many men went shopping alone as did women. It looks as if men don't mind -- or maybe even like-- engaging in activities outside of the house on their own. When women have no companions to go out with, rather than go out alone, they seem to stay home and do housework or watch TV.

Another reason for staying home is the fear of going out - a very realistic fear of being hurt or mugged, well documented in other parts of our inquiry. Both men and women, however, are victims to such assaults.

Many more of our respondents went out visiting than have visitors at home. Women go visiting more, and with friends. Men go shopping more, usually alone. When others are involved in weekend activities, it tends to be friends and not relatives.

At least 1/3 of respondents did nothing special on major holidays like Christmas and Easter. As with week end activities, holidays that are not spent alone tend to be spent in company of neighbors and friends, and not relatives - very seldom, if ever, with children.

Our data seems to show that this group of older black men and women have to rely mostly on friends for companionship. Two thirds of them report having close friends; a third do not. The men again emerge as loners, fewer of them having close friends. Best friends are seen often; over half of them live in the neighborhood, most of the rest in Newark. This, however, should not divert attention from the fact that 40% of the people either have no close friends or have not seen the friend for over one month. They - and some of the others - need a special kind of service that will help reduce their isolation.

Summary and Conclusion

1. There seems to be no positive correlation between living alone and feeling lonely. Close to half of the respondents live alone. But people who live with others feel lonely just as often as those who live alone.

2. Relatives are there for emergencies but not for companionship. Almost half of the respondents have a child living near by. They have frequent contact with them: there is no evidence that children are neglecting or abandoning their parents. However, this interaction is mainly in the form of telephone conversations. For companionship, going shopping, visiting, doing things over the week end, spending major holidays, they depend mostly on friends and neighbors.

3. Many of the respondents, especially the women, are eager for more companionship. One third say they feel all alone, that they wish people would visit them more often. Two thirds say they don't get to visit friends as often as they would like to, that they are afraid of going out. In spite of their expressed desire for more social interaction, they seldom, if ever, participate in club-type activities, including church groups or Senior Citizen Centers.

4. The implications of these findings for practice seem clear: to meet the needs of this group we must go beyond the passive social service activities. What is needed is outreach programs with outreaching personnel. The social service worker has to be a kin surrogate or friend surrogate: a catalyst

who will help the client help himself; somebody who will go to the homes, form personal relationship with the clients act as a friend. This catalyst person may be a necessary condition for their making use of other kinds of service or personal relations available to them.

ABSTRACT:

The level of social interaction and isolation in a randomly selected sample of 156 aged Blacks in an urban area of New Jersey was studied by means of personal interviews. The interaction patterns are analyzed in terms of availability, relations with, and reactions towards close and distant relatives and friends, and the relation between subjective and objective states of loneliness is investigated.

The results show no positive relation between living alone and feeling lonely. In spite of frequent contacts with children and other relatives, the respondents depend mostly on friends for companionship and for social pursuits such as visiting, shopping, and activities over the week end and major holidays. Participation in a club-type activities and church groups are minimal. One third of the respondents say they feel all alone, and about two thirds express a desire for more social interaction.

The findings are interpreted as pointing to the need for outreach programs with outreaching personnel, where the social service worker acts as kin or firend surrogate.

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